

"Jim, Mom is just waiting to die. There is nothing wrong with her other than the usual complaints of old age. But she won't do anything. She just sits in her room, day after day. She won't come to family functions. She won't participate in the activities at the Assisted Living facility where she lives. I'm at my wit's end. I don't know how to motivate her to do something."

A very common concern of those who care for an aging loved one! As is the response I hear so often from the older adult caught in this behavior pattern. "What's the use of getting involved. I'm going to die soon and so is everyone else around me. I've lived my life. Now all that is left is memories and waiting."

What a sad commentary on how too much of our culture views aging. It evolves over a lifetime of being a part of a culture that idolizes youth. We want to look young! We want to have every ache and pain attended to! We want the same energy level at eighty as we did at twenty! We often feel cheated when reality hits and we see that all our wanting and pretending has gotten us nowhere. Against this backdrop the "waiting to die" syndrome is understandable. Too much time has been spent fighting the inevitable, which feels like failure when it arrives.

As churches and Christians we need to work at every age level to reclaim aging as a time of beauty and possibility, a time for new insights and directions! How do we do that?

Intergenerational sharing is one great way! Grandma is never too old to enjoy the "newest" baby. Family events that allow its senior members to shine and share their wisdom is another! Allowing the younger members to interact "close up" with the older members is good for both groups and teaches silently that age is not a barrier to relating. Experiment with such sharing events within the family and within the church. Allow story telling to take place between generations. Refuse to go along with the common thought that "older people prefer to be with older people" or "younger people prefer to be with people their own age." These things may be true to some extent, but most behavior is learned and implanted by attitudes. Adopt a new attitude about older adulthood!

I don't know who Thelma Ruble is, but she is quoted as having said, "I'm not living on borrowed time. I'm living on given time." Preaching, teaching, modeling Thelma Ruble's attitude is another place to begin. We need to reclaim the biblical teaching of each day being a gift to be accepted and lived as fully as possible. We need to reclaim the understanding that successful living is measured by how well and how lovingly we relate to others, not by what we have or by what we can do.

Effective ministry to and with older adults begins with knowing that age must never be a barrier to being relational or engaging with the world around us. It begins with seeing the older adult as having intrinsic value regardless her abilities or inabilities. It begins with offering opportunities for breaking down those barriers.

Live on given time and help others to do likewise!

*Jim Stenson*  
Coordinator, Older Adult Ministries